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ABSTRACT

Communication problems within an urban society are those of communication from the people to the city, communication from the city government to the people, and interpersonal interaction among the people. Communication to the city from the people has often taken the form of protests, occasionally leading to riots. The interpersonal communicator from the city to the people is usually the policeman. The problem with interpersonal relationships among the people themselves involves differences in language usage, especially among low-income groups. There is great need for speech communication research in this area, especially in order to determine whether or not language training in the schools can help end the difficulties that urban people have in interacting on a personal basis. (RM)

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Suggestions for Speech-Communication Research in Urban Settings

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A paper prepared for the Action Caucus on Speech Communication in Urban Settings, SCA, Chicago, 1972.

INTRODUCTION

Cities can be described as "gathering places for trade." They need to be concerned with getting large numbers of people to small areas with maximum efficiency. They need to provide efficient manufacturing and trade facilities. They need to provide sufficient support facilities--such as housing, education and recreation--for the people involved in that trade. They must solve all the problems involved in this endeavor knowing that seventy-three percent of the total population now live in urban areas.

That cities are not succeeding in solving these, and concomitant, problems can be seen by even the casual observer. Traffic jams the highway. Waste materials pollute the atmosphere. People move to the suburbs. In fact, more people now live in the suburbs than the city proper. Those who remain are often involved in crime, protest and riot to the point that cities can no longer be described as "gathering places for protection."

Joseph M. Conforti, in a recent issue of Society (11) described the situation more graphically:

> If Newark is where America's cities are going, few will take comfort in the urban future, for Newark presents a bleak prospect. A city that at nights has few pedestrians on feared streets lighted only by street lamps; where you can do little window shopping in the evening because many stores bar their windows with opaque steel; a city that has a severe housing sortrage amidst thousands of abandoned houses; a geographically small city with huge empty (urban renewal) lots that, together with the abandoned housing, create a bombed-out appearance; a city where the German shepherd population rises faster than new office buildings; where there is a cop, public or private, for every 150 residents; where one out of every ten residents lives in a public housing project; one out of three is on welfare and where urban pathologies can be described only in superlatives.

The communication problems within an urban setting might be categorized in three general ways: (1) communication from the people to the city; (2) communication from the city government to the people, and (3) communication among the people themselves. Not all communication problems are speech-communication problems, however. Cities, for example, can communicate in many ways. The architecture of Chicago communicates a different sense of modernity and beauty than the strip bars of San Francisco.

"Unique" aspects of speech-communication on the other hand, would seem to underscore an emphasis, although not necessarily a dependence, on interpersonal, primarily verbal, communication. Such considerations would rule out the above examples from the domain of study in and of themselves. They become relevant if, and only if, they lead to significant interpersonal interaction.

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In spite of this restriction, the possible domain of study is still large. The areas of research proposed for study here are selected primarily because they would seem to have an important role in resolving some of the speech-communication problems in the urban areas and secondarily because they have relevance to theory construction within the field.

Communication to the City

For any governing body to satisfy the needs of the people, there have to be effective, open channels of communication from the people to the governing body. When legitimate, recognized channels are not open, or are not sufficient, other means of communication become necessary. The method used prominently during the past decade is most often called protest communication, and is sometimes called a riot.

Not all protest communication is relevant to the problems of a city. The civil rights movement is a national problem, as is protest of the Viet Nam war. Cities however, are many times convenient meeting places for the protesters to come together, and in the civil rights movement, problems in particular cities oftentimes become targets for change.

At this point, let's review a little of that movement (30). In 1896, the Supreme Court (Plessy vs. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537) gave legal sanction to segregation ruling that,"If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane."

In 1954 this decision was struck down (Brown et al. vs. The Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483). The Supreme Court now rules that "in the field of public education the 'doctrine' of separate but equal has no place."

On December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Mrs. Rosa Parks boarded a bus and took her usual place in the back. However, when the bus became crowded she refused to give up her seat to a white man and was arrested. Martin Luther King then "stepped forward reluctantly into history." Eventually the Supreme Court ruled that bus segregation was illegal.

In 1963, King went to Washington to have President Kennedy send a civil rights bill to Congress which would insure blacks of rights guaranteed to all Americans. Kennedy answered that the American people were not ready and that Congress would not pass it (28). This led to the march on Washington. The Civil Rights Bill became law in July, 1964. Blacks were still disenfranchised, however. Thus Selma, Alabama, and the Voting Rights Bill of 1965.

Intermingled in the Civil Rights movement has been the Viet Nam war protest, accentuated by the Kent State experience and the 1968 riot during the Chicago convention. As the (protest) movement spread to the campus, certain types of research became questioned if not outright dangerous. Nevertheless, a great deal has been written, if not learned, about the movement itself. Legal and ethical considerations have been discussed, the process has been analyzed, the people involved have been demographized, and reactions to various types of protest have been described.

Haiman (18), for instance, has pointed out the inconsistency involved in stopping traffic for parades but prohibiting mass demonstrations because they interfere with traffic.

Skolnick, in discussing the symbolic characteristics of protest observed that "...confrontations arranged by students have been usually more 'symbolic' than 'disruptive' or 'destructive'." Further, "there is very little evidence that many students are willing (much less able) to disrupt functioning, attack persons, or destroy property in the university. But they are willing to engage in symbolic protest--to symbolically 'throw their bodies on the machine'." (29,p. 106) Corbett (12, p. 292) concludes that "any new rhetoric that develops will certainly have to give increasing attention to the nonverbal means of communication."

Hymes (20) identified four phases of localized protests, noting the tendency for a given phase to include some of the strategies of earlier phases: (1) Sit-ins, (2) Boycott, (3) Picketing, and (4) mass demonstration. Each seems to be used only after the failure of the previous phase. Blumberg (8) for example, argues that local demonstrations would probably not have taken place if preceding nonviolent protests had been successful. When they do, their form and timing seems to be predictable on the basis of recently preceding protests in other cities. They tend to be terminated either by success or waning enthusiasm.

Blumberg further argues that the movement gets increasingly larger to the extent that there is (1) a high frequency of exposure of members to non-members and (2) a sufficiently high probability that non-members, when exposed, will join. In other words, contagion, at least at a local level, seems to be highly dependent upon interpersonal influence.

Feagin (15) studied the Bedford-Stuyvesant ghetto after the 1964 riot there to identify the characteristics of riot participants. He found that violence oriented blacks, as opposed to nonviolence oriented blacks, tended to be younger, males, of lower income, more recent newcomers to the community, and less regular churchgoers. Three-fourths of the respondents felt that nonviolent means such as sit-ins would be sufficient to meet equal-rights ends, while only seventeen per cent felt that nonviolent means would be inadequate.

In studying a white, upper-middle class sample, Olsen (26) found that seventy-eight per cent favor the civil rights movement in general, but only forty-one per cent would favor staging a mass protest. Jeffries (22) found that white reaction is dependent in part on contact with blacks. Those lacking contact are more fearful, cite more outside agitation explanations, and voice more punitive responses than those having contact, independently of prejudice and proximity to the riot. Again, the importance of interpersonal communication is underscored.

Bondurant (9) has proposed a model for describing the protest movement. One needs to determine the particular form of the protest from the larger set of possible actions, the particular cities that become involved, the nature of the particular participants, and how certain targets are selected over other possible ones.

Such information, along with the above cited research, fits nicely into Lasswell's classic "who?...says what?...in which channel?...to whom?...with what effect?" communication model (24). But why do nonviolent protests sometimes become violent riots? Why Watts, Newark and Detroit?

It has been written that "blacks are dark in a white society, poor in a rich country." More to the present point, Smith (30, p. 385) has written:

> A man who lives in a slum tenement, who has no job, whose babies are bitten by rats, and who has lost his self-respect because he must accept charity, finds little comfort in the knowledge that his Southern brothers can now vote and sleep in white hotels.

Given such little relationship between the research and the problem, it seems small wonder that all over the U.S. white sociologists are finding their competence challenged by black militants. This antagonism has also spread to the respondents, making it difficult to collect data. Studying the problem, Record interviewed 140 of the estimated 750 white sociologists specializing in race and ethnic relations. He found that nearly a fourth have given up this field of inquiry (Time, August 7, 1972, p. 47). A more relevant approach would seem to be to study the nature of violence itself rather than simply the nature of the participants or the diffusion of the event.

There are two basic formulations for the incidence of violence in society. Each has separate implications for speech communication research. The first is that man is an aggressive animal. The implication is that "present day civilized man suffers from insufficient discharge of his aggressive drive..." (25, p. 243). What is needed is to provide people with safe and innocuous means of aggressing. This could be done through the mass media (if it were the case that vicarious aggression reduces the need for further aggression). Or it could be done interpersonally by getting people to engage in innocuous activities such as sports. The difficulty is pointed out by Berkowitz's argument (6, p. 15) that "aggression can stimulate further aggression, at least until physical exhaustion, fear, or guilt inhibits further violence."

The second formulation, first proposed by Dollard et al. (14) is that aggression is oftentimes the response to some act of frustration. Here the implication is that "civil tranquility is best served by eliminating barriers to the satisfaction of human needs and wants," remembering that "privations in themselves are much less likely to breed violence than is the dashing of hope" (Berkowitz, 6, p. 14).

A great deal of the research in this area has been concerned with the relationship between violence in the society and violence in the media (cf. vols. 9 and 9A of A Staff Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence). It has also been found that blacks are more likely than whites to be media "socializees" (17). That is to say, blacks learn behaviors appropriate for a white, middle class society primarily from the media, particularly from television. Furthermore, blacks are more likely to believe what they see on television than whites.

The significance of this is two fold. First, blacks may be learning that it is appropriate to solve problems violently. Second, they may become more frustrated by seeing a lifestyle so completely foreign to their own.

Research on interpersonal communication aspects of these problems, however, is practically nonexistent. To what extent is the "feeling" of frustration spread interpersonally? It seems unlikely that people plan interpersonally to have a riot, in spite of occasional newspaper reports to the contrary. What seems more likely is that people become aware of their frustrations interpersonally. Television serves as a vicarious "dashing of hope" by its contrast with life as it's known. All that is needed is some precipitating incident.

What is required in terms of research, however, is not simply the study of the interpersonal spread of frustration. Rather, what is needed is the study of interpersonal communication between the people and the city concerning the frustration. It may be such channels do not exist. Cities are not adept at establishing "rumor control" clinics during times of crisis. What they need are viable means of "frustration awareness" clinics. If cities can become aware of the basic needs and wants of the populace more efficiently and precisely, perhaps the incidence of riots to communicate these needs and wants will be greatly diminished. The input of speech-communication in this area might be to help meet the need.

Communication From the City

As already observed, cities [Ed. note: City Hall?] communicate in many ways. Many times their response to the needs of the people, especially the inner-city people who seem to cause all the problems, is to "concretize" the problem with a new superhighway or a new urban university. When considering aspects of interpersonal communication, however, one most readily thinks of the policeman. It is he more than anyone else, save perhaps the telephone operator, who is turned to in times of crisis. And it is he more than anyone else who represents the city interpersonally.

The policeman's job has become exceedingly complex at a crucial time in urban history. As Ahern (1, p. 3) put it,

> He used to be a cops-and-robbers caricature. Now he is a psychologist, a social worker, a doctor, a lawyer, and a part-time judo expert who occasionally arrests criminals as a sideline.

While it is no doubt true, as Ahern argues, that the policeman is being asked to shoulder too much of society's responsibility, he is nevertheless at the center of the problem previously described. Not only must he react to violence, but he sometimes seems to be the pr(ipitating factor in the violence. One need only think of Watts and Chicago to be reminded of this. In another context, Berkowitz (6) has argued that "external stimuli associated with aggression will elicit relatively strong attacks from people who, for one reason or another, are ready to act aggressively." It appears that that external stimulus is sometimes a policeman.

Bostrom and Hurt (10) tested the relative credibility of policemen, using the semantic differential. They found, somewhat contradictory to the above analysis, that policemen "are rether uniformly viewed as a credible message source," at least among high school and college students. Furthermore, they found no differences among a rural-urban comparison. However, they did find differences along a black-white comparison. Blacks rate policemen as less "competent" and as less "dynamic" than do whites.

Further research is needed in this area. One not only needs to know the credibility ratings of policemen among people actually living in cities, but also the actual areas people expect policemen to be competent in. How do people expect policemen to act in certain interpersonal situations? Furthermore, research needs to be undertaken for the proper training of policemen in interpersonal communication. The "sensitivity training" undertaken by some departments is a case in point. This is a definite area that speech-communication can make an input. The effect of such training could conceivably be studied by comparing police credibility in cities that do not have such training.

Black and Labes (7) point out a further problem in this area. They compare the police force to guerrillas in that neither separates the civilians from the enemy. Everyone is suspect and dangerous. Interpersonal training might be analogous to a pacification program. Police might be taught to be as concerned with the "cause" as well as with the "catch."

Communication Among People

Intermingled throughout the problem of interpersonal relations is that of possible differences in language usage among the participants. This is especially the case, it turns out, among urban populations, which oftentimes have a disproportionate share of blacks and lower SES. Language is a primary avenue for communication, absorption and interpretation of the environment. It's conceivable that if a particular group has what might be called language "deficiencies," they might have more difficulty in making their needs understood (or listened to). They might thus be more inclined to resort to violence in order to communicate those needs.

The significance of the problem can be stated more clearly by considering I.Q. tests. Differences in performance have been consistently found between black and white samples (19). This has led some psychologists (16) to argue that there are innate differences in intelligence. It has been suggested that the integration of schools and miscegenation should be prohibited in order to avoid mixing these innate differences.

Other psychologists have argued, "Poppycock." The problem is, to them, not with differences in intelligence but with the measuring instrument. Knowles and Shah (23) argue that in order to avoid the middle class, language-oriented bias of I.Q. tests, verbal type items need to be eliminated and cultural referents need to be reduced. Rosenberg (27) claims to have developed such an instrument in his "John Hopkins Perceptual Test."

The work of Bernstein (2,3,4,5) has given theoretical and empirical support to the position that there are language differences among SES groups. His basic proposition is that there are two language codes, restricted and elaborated. In the restricted code, there is a wide range of implicitly shared meanings. Family breakfast conversation might be an example. The conversation is more socially than conceptually oriented, is stereotyped and limited in its expressive alternatives. The elaborated code is more concept oriented and meanings are shared more explicitly. There are more completed sentences and a more complex grammatical structure is utilized.

As the work of Williams and Naremore (31) has shown, the two codes may represent a continuum such that the one used will be dependent in part on the communication demands of the particular situation. However, Bernstein's work has shown that lower class speech (in Britain) can be characterized by the restricted code, whereas middle class speech is more characterized by the elaborated code.

The argument is that the different classes emphasize the different codes during the socialization process. When asked, for example, "Flower?" the lower class parent says, "Yes." The middle class parent says, "Yes, that is a pretty flower." The long range implications for this sort of training are evident.

Deutsch (13) found that children with lower class and minority group status have poorer language ability. Moreover, he found that the relationship was stronger for the fifth grade child than the first grade child. In other words, there may be a "cumulative deficiency" problem. As a result, lower SES groups may be progressively alienated from the middle class because of an inability to communicate. Huffine (21), however, has found some evidence to the contrary. She feels the school can overcome some of these differences.

The applications for speech-communication research are profound. The concern becomes especially important as school systems are required to end de facto segregation by busing. Whether or not language training in the school can overcome these differences between economic classes or whether earlier language training is required is of paramount importance to the eventual success of busing programs in bringing people closer together interpersonally.

Conclusion

In all of these areas suggested for study, the concern has been that the research is conducive to solving some of the interpersonal problems found today in urban settings. The success of such a program may have long range significance for both society in general and the place of the university within that society in particular.

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